

# Children's Hospital Fil-Am employees fight for fair wages and other job benefits

*"It's time for Filipino health care workers to speak out" – Macrina Cale, employee*

By AURORA S. CUDAL



**Velma Veloria, (left) former Filipino American Representative to the Washington State Assembly, now the Coordinator of the United Health Care Workers (UHW) - Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 2028 based in San Diego is shown with Macrina Espina Cale, Certified Nursing Assistant at the Children's Hospital San Diego and a member of the SEIU Bargaining Team. (FP Photo)**

SAN DIEGO, Calif. — In an impassioned appeal for community support, Macrina Espina Cale, a certified nursing assistant (CNA) for 16 years at the Children's Hospital San Diego called on her Filipino American counterparts "to unite and speak with one voice" in their demand for fair wages, employer paid insurance for the employee and dependent children and \$20 for spouse, and staffing that ensures quality care for children at the Children's Hospital San Diego.

Cale met with The Filipino Press to share her story as a member of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 2028. She was accompanied by SEIU-United Health Care Workers' Coordinator, Velma Veloria.

Children's Hospital San Diego (CHSD) is an independent, non-profit hospital that treats almost 80 percent of San Diego's hospitalized children. Its care-

givers, including nursing assistants, housekeepers, food service workers, clerical employees and maintenance workers voted to join SEIU nearly two years ago. Rather than recognize its employees' decision to form a union, Children's Hospital appealed the election decision and held off bargaining for almost nine months. Although the workers have now been bargaining for more than a year, Children's Hospital has not agreed to any substantial gains and workers are still without a first contract. Through bargaining, workers have made modest proposals for guaranteed wage increases, affordable health insurance, and a minimum wage of \$9 an hour, so that Children's Hospital employees will be able "to make both ends meet".

As a member of the Bargaining Team, Cale represents the

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concerns and interests of the 700 CHSD employees who are SEIU members, 70 of whom are Filipino Americans. Cale said, "At first, I was scared to speak up. I just work hard and do a good job taking care of the sick children. Usually, Filipinos are silent. We do not complain about our low wages."

"Being a member of the Bargaining team has changed my attitude. Now, I speak up in order to help improve the life of others. It is no longer about me. There are many of us who could not afford to pay for the medical insurance of our children. There are still many CHSD employees who rely on public assistance programs or who work two jobs because of low pay", Cale added. Cale who hails from Tachoban, Leyte said. "Now that I am already in this fight, I could no longer stop fighting so that others would have a much better life. We are setting a standard

for others to follow," Cale added.

A recent study conducted by the Center on Policy Initiatives (CPI) revealed that more than half of the clerical, service and maintenance employees at Children's Hospital earn less than a self-sufficiency wage of \$13.20 an hour for a single adult living in San Diego County. Some CHSD employees earn as little as \$6.89 per hour. CHSD employees must pay between \$217 and \$624 per month for access to family health insurance. Nearly 40% of employees do not purchase health insurance through Children's Hospital. As a result, one in five employees rely on public assistance programs to provide health insurance for themselves.

However, records show that Children's Hospital is profitable. After losing money for a few years, the hospital recovered with a \$1.4 million profit in 2004. According to its own financial statements, in 2004 CHSD reported almost \$200 million in net assets and a \$102 million invest-

ment portfolio. CHSD has reported that the 2005 fiscal year was the hospital's best bottom line since 2000 and best operating margin since 1997.

Meanwhile, Velma Veloria, first Filipino American representative to the Washington State Assembly is now in San Diego to establish the office of the United Health Care Workers, a unit of SEIU.

"There are 140,000 SEIU-UHW members in California but there is no office here in San Diego," Veloria said.

The presence of Velma Veloria in San Diego would make a big difference in union organizing especially among the lowly paid Filipino health care workers. An experienced community activist and social justice advocate, Velma brings to her position organizing skills which served her well as the undefeated Filipino American representative to the Washington State Assembly for six consecutive terms.

In a related development, a demonstration rally is schedul-